

MARY OAK, AN ENTREPRENEURIAL WOMAN

Submitted by Kimberly R. Smith, Presque Isle Historical Society



Mary Oak.

Often times, communities don't know a lot about women from their past as, during those earlier years, women were considered second class citizens, not being allowed to vote or own property. Women were simply known as someone's wife or mother. It seems in Presque Isle's history that, of the few women we do know more about, all were unusual for their times, typically remaining unmarried and often owning their own businesses. It was considered a very negative social stigma for women to not marry, oftentimes being referred to by derogatory terms such as "old maid" and "spinster." One such local woman was Mary Oak.

Mary H. Oak was born January 8, 1891 to James Hastings Oak and Adella Estelle (Johnson) Oak. Adella died in 1894 leaving James with seven children to raise, the youngest being only two. Of the seven, Mary was the next to the youngest, just three years



Bolton Block, showing Oak Studio, 1920.



Mary in Florida.

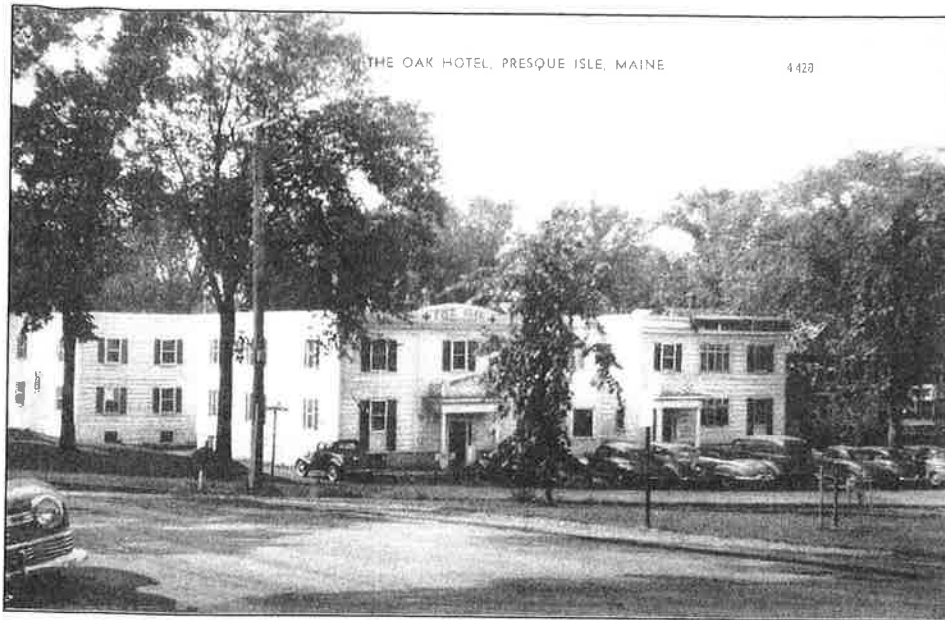
old at the time of her mother's death.

James Hastings Oak had settled in Presque Isle in the 1880s to lumber. In the months in which he was not able to lumber, he built homes. Oak was also the largest shipper of railroad ties and telegraph poles in Aroostook County. Oak Street in Presque Isle is so named as his machinery barn was located on that street.

Mary was born in the "Eva Wheeler" house on the corner of Third and Academy Streets. The house had been built by her father.

She lived in the house across the street from what is now City Hall on Second Street, also built by her father. This house still stands today.

Mary learned photography from J.B. Smart, a well-known local photographer, for whom she worked. She then went to work for George Wright in Caribou and continued in the field for a time in Boothbay Harbor. She opened her first studio in the Bolton Block on the corner of Main and State Streets in Presque Isle on November 1, 1912 where she



THE OAK HOTEL, PRESQUE ISLE, MAINE

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few years. She would make the trip by car traveling about 200 miles per day. It was during her stays in various apartment houses in Florida that she got the idea to build an apartment building. In fact, Mary had an apartment house built on the corner of Second and Academy Streets in 1933. It was quite popular and there did not seem to be enough rental space available. This building still serves as an apartment building today.

employed a staff of three. The Bolton Block burned down in 1935 thus destroying her studio. She re-opened her studio in the Oak Apartment building and operated it until 1938. Mary "wintered" in Florida for several weeks over the course of a

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In 1932, the Unitarian Church on State Street closed due to lack of attendance. Mary bought the property in 1937 with the intention of building an apartment house on the site. However, she ended up selling the property to the Masons just a few months later.

She built the Oak Apartments in 1937 and the Oak Hotel in 1941. The Hotel was a rooming house which had a few apartments (46 units all together) that served as housing relief for the military during times of housing shortages. The Oak Apartments were considered to be the most up to date structures of their kind in the state when built. The buildings were owned by Mary and her sister Marion. The Oak Hotel charged \$4 per night for a room while the Northeastland, the other main hotel in town, was charging \$8 per night.

The November 18, 1937 edition of the Star Herald featured a two-page spread on new the Oak Apartments featuring photographs and ads for companies that played active roles in building the apartments.

Wes Shaw worked for Mary and

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Fire breaks out at the Oak Hotel.



Mary standing beside her car.

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in her arms. Mary is reported to have had a remarkable memory even up to the time of her death which resulted from a fall.

In May of 1873, following the lynching of her husband, May's mother, Rosella, was called to court, as reported in the local newspaper. However, the paper gives no reason for her being called into court. She was ordered to pay a \$300 fine, which was quite a lot of money at that time. Several citizens stepped up and paid the fine for her. She was quoted in the newspaper as saying, "... my two little children are at home, and a deaf child, and no one to take care of them..."

The Carleton Sentinel, in New Brunswick, reported on May 3, 1873: "...Cullen was from the province, but had lived in Aroostook two years; he leaves a wife and one child." This would seem to indicate that May was Jim's only biological child.

Edward Oswell Twist, May's half-brother, died in Presque Isle on November 11, 1935 of cerebral thrombosis. At the time of his death he was 67 years old, 1 month, and 17 days. This places his birth date at September 25, 1868. Thus, he was about 4 and a half when his step-father, Jim Cullen, was killed in 1873.

Jim Cullen was born about 1846, and



Fort Garrison.

was approximately 5 years older than his wife, Rosella. At the time May was born, Jim was about 26 years old and Rosella was about 21 years old. Rosella and Jim were married on August 2, 1871 in Presque Isle, a little over a year before May was born. However, the couple had been living together in Peel, New Brunswick earlier in 1871 before they were married.

It is uncertain when and where May's mother Rosella died, and is buried. Her father was buried in an unmarked grave after his untimely death in 1873. The site of Jim Cullen's

grave is located not far from the Presque Isle airport runways at what was the town dump when Jim was unceremoniously buried there.

It is also uncertain when May married her husband, Frank Brown. She had no known children. She died on February 22, 1944 at age 72 years, 5 months and 15 days. She died of malnutrition and senility due to a gastric ulcer and a gastrointestinal obstruction. Her husband, Frank Brown, buried his wife in Perth-Andover, New Brunswick Canada in the Presbyterian Cemetery. 🌿

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Marion as a janitor in the Hotel, and he also drove them around. Mary's great-nephew, Alan Oak, worked in the hotel during his high school years for \$5 a day. He registered new guests and ran the switchboard. Mary's office was right off the lobby so she could see the comings and goings as well as keep an eye on her employees. It is said that she ruled with an iron fist.

The architect for the apartments was John LeVasseur. The apartment building was advertised as "suitable for dancing, socials, and card parties." The building also had a lounge kitchen

and laundry which was shared by all tenants.

Mary Oak passed away on June 7, 1962. She was survived by her sister Marion R. Oak, a niece, Mrs. Maurice Eastman of Bangor, and five nephews. Her service was held at Graves Funeral Home. It was officiated by Reverend Richard Ryder of the Congregational Church. She is interred in the Fairmount Cemetery. It is said that Mary smoked and liked her whiskey. These two vices may have contributed to her death from cancer.

Her hotel burned to the ground on April 12, 1975 under mysterious circumstances. 🌿